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WASHINGTON Congressional investigators late Tuesday requested detailed documents from U.S. Navy Secretary Ray Mabus and a private contractor involved in the testing and cleanup of contaminated water at the Marines' Camp Lejeune.

More requests for information are expected this week for the Environmental Protection Agency and a second private contractor.

Among investigators' questions: Why a federal agency charged with understanding the health impacts of the contamination didn't realize until recently that benzene - a fuel solvent known to cause cancer in humans - was among the elements found in drinking water at Camp Lejeune.

For years, the Marines apparently did not provide documents about the benzene to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, which has worked for nearly two decades to understand the contamination and its health impacts, said U.S. Rep. Brad Miller, a Raleigh Democrat who is chairman of the oversight panel on the House Science and Technology Committee.

"We want to know what did [the Navy and the Marine Corps] know about the water, when did they know, and what did they do about it?" Miller said in an interview.

"Did they know about it during the 30 years when Marines and families were exposed to the water?" Miller asked. "Did they know about it and not do anything to stop it?"

Wants to see data

In a letter, Miller told Mabus he wants access by Monday to a password-protected online database that contains thousands of records related to the contamination thought to have occurred from 1957 to 1987. The database has not been public.

Navy spokeswoman Lt. j.g. Laura Stegherr said late Tuesday she was looking into the matter.

The News & Observer reported last month that newly revealed documents show upwards of 800,000 gallons of fuel leaked from underground tanks near a well that served base barracks, officers' quarters and the hospital - an indication that benzene may have played a more significant role in the contamination than previously known publicly.

Many documents reviewed by the newspaper make repeated reference to benzene, a component of fuel.

At a meeting in 1988 of federal, state and Lejeune environmental officials, for example, a contractor talked about the benzene contamination and described the water as "toxic enough for you that you don't want to touch that water."

"Obviously we've got a fuel problem here," he said, according to a transcript.

A test in July 1984 showed benzene at a level of 380 parts per billion, well above the federal standard of 5 parts per billion. The well was shuttered in November 1984.

As recently as last month, a Marine spokesman said the main contaminants in the water had been trichloroethylene and tetrachloroethylene, much of it from an off-base dry cleaners.

And in January, Mabus told senators that a mortality study tracking deaths among Marines who lived at the base was unnecessary, citing a previous study that showed no conclusive link between the toxic water and cancers and other ailments suffered by former base residents.

After news reports about the depths of potential benzene contamination, the Navy, which oversees the Marine Corps, said it would pay for the \$1.53 million study.

Some estimates are that a million people were exposed to contaminated water at the base over a 30-year period through 1987. More than 155,000 people in all 50 states and the District of Columbia have signed up with the Marines' Camp Lejeune water contamination registry.

Also Tuesday, congressional investigators asked a private contractor, Baker Environmental Inc., for access by March 31 to its records related to analysis and cleanup work.

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